Opinion: Have we reached peak guilt yet? Or can it still build support for progressive policies?

National Post (f/k/a The Financial Post) (Canada)

March 3, 2021 Wednesday

Web Edition

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Section: FP COMMENT

Length: 1096 words

Body

Social concern is an important responsibility of citizens. And guilt is a useful emotion that helps us to remain moral beings. But guilt is a wasting resource. Lots of us are beginning to feel guilted out. People argue about whether we have reached "peak oil," meaning oil supplies may be beginning to decline. In the same way, we may now be nearing peak guilt.

When people seek to evoke someone's guilt for the conduct of their distant ancestors rather than for their own conduct, the gulf between personal responsibility and imposed responsibility can become exploitative. Ancestral guilt based on race or national origin simply is not relevant for a large and growing number of Canadians. According to the 2016 census, more than one in five Canadians was born abroad. My parents and I (as a little child) fled to Canada from Hungary - never a North American colonial power. Should I feel guilty, and in some way personally responsible, for oppression that British or French Canadians committed decades or even centuries ago, simply because my skin colour matches theirs?

Should anyone feel guilty for something they simply are, immutably, such as being white-skinned? That is guilt for being, not guilt for doing. It treats skin colour as the creator of moral responsibility regardless of a person's conduct.

Feelings of guilt are easy to exploit. That's why the medieval church sold indulgences ("Get out of Hell free" cards). As God-based religions have diminished in influence in the developed West, some of the profit from guilt has been captured by others. In today's secular culture, guilt marketing operates at both the political and commercial level.

I have attended events at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall where before the show it is announced that the hall stands on the traditional territory of the Hurons - an expression of historical guilt that is of little relevance to the many Asian, Caribbean and European immigrants and their descendants in the audience. Nor does this ritual do anything to help any Hurons who may be attending. But event producers and Roy Thomson Hall must believe this momentary invocation of guilt somehow enhances their marketing.

Canada once subjected Chinese immigrants to a racially discriminatory poll tax. It sent Japanese Canadians to prison camps during the Second World War and took away their property because of concern their ancestral origin made them disloyal. These were much more recent events than settlers moving in on Indigenous peoples when Canada didn't yet exist as a country, yet they are little discussed these days. Should ethnically Chinese or Japanese Canadians, whose parents and grandparents were victims in their own right, feel guilty about British immigrants colonizing Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries? When does the victim/oppressor blame game end?

The exploitation of guilt isn't limited to issues of skin colour. Many of us apparently see an escalating carbon tax as penance for our excessive materialism, even if a tax on the 0.48 per cent of the world's population we represent will have virtually zero effect on global temperatures but will devastate the Canadian economy if carried too far.

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The main purpose of the rebated carbon tax is neither fiscal nor ecological but psychological: financial punishment for the sin of fossil fuel use, supposedly in aid of saving the planet. Since large parts of the world (China, India and Africa) unashamedly promise to increase their CO2 emissions, swamping the effects of whatever Canada might do, our carbon tax is really a species of sin tax. As if that were not enough, our government has promised "The Great Reset" - more costly "save the planet" policies despite the more urgent need to recover from the economic damage inflicted by the pandemic.

Like sex, guilt sells. And the sale benefits the sellers. Canadian politicians who claim to have a better (i.e., more costly) climate plan get elected. Hedge funds that buy and sell "green" investments in massively subsidized renewables earn excellent investment returns. Media owners and journalists profit from presenting the scariest climate stories. Large government bureaucracies (e.g., Indian Affairs, now called Indigenous Services) are sustained by the need to keep helping victims - though not so successfully as to make the bureaucracy obsolete. Advocacy groups like Greenpeace, WWF, Extinction Rebellion and so on garner donations and political power by presenting their climate advocacy as the planetary solution - one that never gets completely implemented, so keep sending those donations.

Guilt marketers need not believe in, nor act personally on, either the problem or the solution being sold. Justin Trudeau doesn't ride a bicycle to get around in the middle of an Ottawa winter; neither does Jagmeet Singh or Erin O'Toole. Mr. Trudeau didn't take a sailboat to his family vacation at the Aga Khan's personal island, he took a jet and a helicopter. And his government bought a pipeline to transport a fossil fuel, which the carbon tax is trying to encourage us to leave in the ground.

Martin Luther King's dream was that people would be judged on the content of their character, not the colour of their skin. Pressing people's guilt buttons regarding their skin colour will work only until people get fed up with it, and it stops working. Likewise, "The Great Reset" - escalating carbon taxes for the environmental sins of driving to work or heating homes - will only work until the resulting unemployment and energy poverty bring about The Great Retreat. Fortunately, because imposed guilt is unpleasant and costly it is also probably unsustainable.

I am not suggesting we don't face real and serious social and environmental problems. We do. But pressing people's guilt buttons won't solve them.

Andrew Roman is a retired litigator. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2021 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

Load-Date: March 3, 2021